

Is high-impact physical activity beneficial for older adults?

By ACSH Staff — January 14, 2014



The question of whether or not individuals 45 years of age and

older should engage in high-impact exercise, such as jogging or sprinting, is not one that has a clear answer at this point. But in the Ask Well [column](#) ^[1] in today's *New York Times* Science section, Gretchen Reynolds sheds some light on this question.

Reynolds highlights three studies on the positive effects of high intensity physical activity:

The first, conducted in 2003 and [published in](#) ^[2] the journal *Sports Medicine*, found that age-related declines in aerobic lung capacity a surrogate for general physical fitness could be reduced by up to 50 percent per decade in young and middle-aged men regularly engaging in high-impact physical activity. However, after age 70, this beneficial effect disappears. These benefits were not seen in women, regardless of age;

The second study was a 2006 review looking at the effects of running on joints, which concluded that running may actually be protective against joint degeneration.

The third study, [published in](#) ^[3] the journal *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise* in 2013, examined the effects of running and walking on osteoarthritis and hip replacement in about 75,000 runners and 15,000 walkers aged 45 or older. The study concluded that running rather than exacerbating actually reduced the rates of osteoarthritis and hip replacement, although this can partially be explained by the fact that runners tended to be thinner than their sedentary age cohorts.

Dr. Michael Joyner, an exercise physiologist at the Mayo Clinic and an expert on aging athletes, added that a lot of concerns about age-appropriate exercise modalities have turned out to be more speculative than real over the years.

ACSH's associate director of public health Ariel Savransky had this to say. There's a lot of conflicting information out there, as is the case with many health topics. This article highlights the many health benefits of high-intensity exercise for older people in particular. If an individual does not have any pre-existing conditions that make it difficult or impossible to engage in high-intensity

exercise, and has not been told by a doctor to avoid this type of activity, there is no reason not to go on that jog. On the other hand, certainly if you have pre-existing health conditions, or if a particular activity is painful, or your doctor has instructed you not to engage in high-intensity physical activity, you should listen to your doctor. There are many other lower impact options out there. Just make sure you get moving somehow.

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[2] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12974656>

[3] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23377837>